2.1: Social Work Assessment

Approximate completion time: 2:30 hours

"It has long been acknowledged that assessment is a key task in social work practice."

Parker and Bradley, 2014: 1

To commence this topic we consider a key element of social work practice – that of assessment. As an experienced practitioner, it is assumed that you are well versed in assessing children, young people and families. This topic will touch upon some contemporary principles of assessment and aims to facilitate your reflection on assessment processes and your skills. Some attention will be paid to the future direction of assessment, particularly with the imminent implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; and, of course, in the spirit of using and developing evidence enriched practice, some key sources are used or signposted for further reading.

What does the Social Work Literature Say about Assessment?

The importance of assessment in social work has been underlined by a series of high-profile adult serious case reviews and enquiries, most prominently those into the deaths of Steven Hoskin (Flynn 2007) and those that focus on fatalities and abuse in institutional settings.

Comment

Manthorpe and Martineau (2009) have analysed a number of these reports and amongst a number of key findings they identify shortcomings in assessment and skilled competence among practitioners across a range of disciplines. (They also provide an
There are several reports about adult safeguarding and serious case reviews, which can be explored by following the King's College London webpage.

- **Serious Case Reviews in adult protection: Guidance and development**

The theoretical literature identifies a conflict between the notion of assessment as an ‘art’ or as a ‘science’ (Parker and Bradley, 2014: 4). This aside, there is a consensus that assessment skills are an essential core component of social work practice (Hennessey, 2011; Parker and Bradley, 2014).

Whittington (2007) categorised the many definitions of assessments that they found, into four ‘ideal types’. These are:

- process-focused
- contingent
- contestation-focused
- critical social constructionist.

Reflecting on these definitions in relation to your own experience of engaging in assessments, look at Whittington’s report below. Specifically, read about the four types above (pages 18–21, Section 9: Definitions of Assessment).

- **Whittington – Assessment in Social Work: A Guide for Learning and Teaching**

**Task**
After reading the above source, and using this example to assist you to reflect on the current context in which you undertake assessments, consider the following and make some notes.

What kind of assessments do you do as part of your role? Choosing just one assessment that you do, how might you describe this assessment's purpose from:

1. A legislative/ policy perspective
2. An organisational/ social work perspective
3. A service user/ carer perspective

Considering Whittington’s 4 ideal types, could you discern which type it most closely relates to?

Why? What factors influenced your choice of ‘type’?

Empowerment and Assessment

Parker and Bradley (2014) emphasise the importance of values in assessment, and state that respect for the individual is essential for empowerment:

“The emphasis on values is important because assessments are about making judgements but not about being judgemental”

(Parker and Bradley, 2014: 6)

The critical social constructionist definition of assessment, as noted earlier, leans towards a concept of assessment as what Baldwin and Walker (2005: 46) describe as an “exchange model, where all people are seen as an expert in their own problems, and the emphasis is upon the exchange of information”. Moving beyond the focus on problems and taking a holistic approach provide for a balanced
assessment of need, risks and strengths in the lives of adults. This is aligned with contemporary concerns of co-production (which we will touch upon later in the module), and with strengths approaches, positive risk taking and change and solution focussed models of assessment and practice.

The Recovery Model

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One example is the Recovery Model. The model dates back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries in the UK, with a re-emergence in the 1980s and 1990s in the US and New Zealand. Rather than focusing on treating or managing symptoms from a medical model perspective, the Recovery Model focuses on working with individuals to regain control, support recovery, and lead a life that is meaningful to them. An important element of this model is that recovery does not always mean complete recovery from a mental health problem: for many it is about staying in control of their lives despite their mental health problems. The following quote is taken from the Mental Health Foundation website, and describes the ethos of the approach:

“Recovery in a mental health context is used to describe a particular way of understanding the effects of mental ill health that is about learning to live with your difficulties and still achieve your hopes and goals”.

(Mental Health Foundation (n.d.: online).

You may also want to watch these short video clips for further information about the Recovery Model.

> Professor Mike Slade – What is Recovery? (2:42 minutes)
> Professor Mike Slade – How do Mental Health Services Need to Change to Support Recovery? (2:38 minutes)
The recovery model promotes a more positive strengths based approach to assessment. In particular Slade (2009) suggests that assessment plays a pivotal part in developing and validating personal meaning, in amplifying strengths, fostering personal responsibility and hopefulness and supporting a positive identity (Slade 2009: 12–16).

Briefly read Slade's report and, in particular, look at pages 12–16.

> Slade – 100 Ways to Support Recovery

**Pause for thought**

Reflect on your own assessment practice and consider if you already integrate any of these principles into your engagement with service users and carers. Are there any ways in which you feel you could influence your assessment practice to become more aligned with that recommended by the Recovery Model?

**Assessment and the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014)**

The final element of this tutorial focuses on the assessment duties and powers contained within this Act. Assessment duties and powers are most prominently contained within Part 3, though there are references to strategic and broader population assessments elsewhere in the Act.
As noted previously, the transference from policy intention to implementation is yet to be solidified by statutory guidance and a code of practice. Nevertheless, it is possible to gain a flavour of the way in which assessment is at the heart of the Act and to reflect on your readiness for these measures.

Here are some resources on assessment and the Act. Choose at least one to read / watch:

The following link is to the Act itself:


Part 3 deals with assessment. Bear in mind that the implementation of the Act is currently subject to consultation, so you may want to refer to other sources below for an insight into some of these developments (as of summer 2015).

The following short video is introduced by the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services and sets out to explain how “the proposed new system for eligibility and assessment – a fundamental part of the Act – could work in practice. It was produced as part of the consultation on the Act” You may wish to watch the first 4 minutes 56 seconds of the video as they refer specifically to adult services.

*YouTube video: Assessment and Eligibility in the SS&WWAct 2014*
The following Welsh Government Consultation Summary Report, produced following consultation in Spring 2015, provides an overview of the consultation process in relation to Parts 3 and 4 of the Act. It also provides the Welsh Government response and analysis of the consultation. Click on the link below:

> [Welsh Government Consultation Summary Report](#)

Pause for thought

Reflecting on the assessment requirements of the 2014 Act in relation to your own practice, take 10 minutes to consider:
> How, if at all, might your engagement with service users and assessments alter going forward with the Act?
> What are the potential opportunities and pitfalls of these measures for the local authority or your organisation if it is non statutory, and for you as a worker engaging in these processes and for children and families?
> Are there any steps you and/ or your local authority are taking / or can take to prepare for these changes?
> Do you know how service users will be informed?

**Conclusion**

In this subtopic, we've had an opportunity to look at assessment as it is defined in the social work literature, and as it relates to your area of practice. We've considered service user engagement in assessments and in particular the notions of an exchange model and holistic assessment of strengths and risks, whilst exploring a practice model for risk assessment and planning with adults in mental health social work. These were intended to provide insight into practice innovation and for you to consider any parallels with your own practice. Finally, brief attention to assessment duties and powers in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) has provided a starting point for looking towards and planning the future. The following learning activity aims to facilitate your reflection on your engagement and skills in assessment.

**References**


Note: Some of the documents on this page are in PDF format. In order to view a PDF you will need Adobe Reader.

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